

Unpleasant people

Trash barrels lie on their side. Litter dots the landscape. Tire tracks rip into the riverbanks. Ragged stumps show where trees were chopped down for firewood.

This is the Agua Fria Conservation Area. Abused, damaged, degraded.

Torn apart by people who seem bent on destroying the very place they've come to enjoy.

The 2,405-acre corner of Lake Pleasant Regional Park should be a showcase for the wonders of a watercourse in the desert, the vivid green of cottonwoods contrasting with stark, arid ridges in the distance.

Instead, it's a showcase for the worst excesses of irresponsible outdoor recreation.

So bad that last month Maricopa County closed the Agua Fria Conservation Area to motor vehicles.

Now there's breathing room to figure out how to restore the area and how to allow access while protecting it.

In September, the county will hold three public meetings to discuss the issue.

The conservation area, which covers about a tenth of Lake Pleasant park, was established in 1995 to protect an arm of the Agua Fria River that's rich in history and habitat. There are the remnants of homesteading, including an old grove of eucalyptus trees, and prehistoric archaeological sites. Anglers like the fishing here, while bird watchers can see a list of species that includes blue herons and bald eagles.

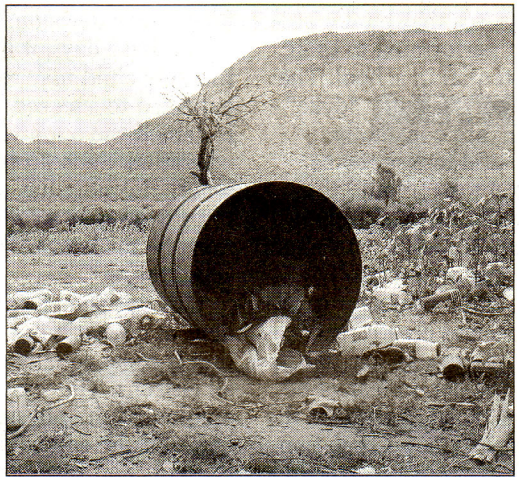
But the county has only about 15 staff members for the entire regional park, including those at the entry station and maintenance workers. There are few resources for watching over the conservation area.

About four years ago, too many visitors started acting like, to put it bluntly, pigs.

In a recent cleanup, 32 tons of trash was collected — and yet plenty of litter remains. People lit illegal campfires and ignored the ban on target shooting, taking potshots at stray cattle that wandered into the conservation area from a neighboring ranch. Once-impenetrable mesquite bosques were reduced to a scattering of trees as people chopped firewood and cleared space.

Vehicles have gouged out the river banks, leaving bare earth where there used to be plants and trees. Over time, the banks will erode away, creating a wider, shallower river bottom. That could have a serious impact on water flow and supplies.

Meanwhile, visitors have risked getting



Recently, 32 tons of trash was picked up at the Agua Fria Conservation Area. Plenty remains.

See the mess

Go online to aztalk.azcentral.com to view a slide show of how visitors have trashed the Agua Fria Conservation Area.

stuck or hurt while driving on the muddy river bottom. A motorcyclist was severely injured this year after hitting a hidden obstacle. When a helicopter arrived to airlift him, sheriff's deputies couldn't get people to clear room for a landing until they threatened to arrest them.

"If they would take care and be respectful, we wouldn't have these issues," says R.J. Cardin, director of the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department.

The county had actually been tolerating motor vehicles in the conservation area when they aren't legally allowed there. The current ban simply enforces existing law. Visitors can still park at the entrance and walk in.

Next month's public meetings will begin the discussion about whether there's a responsible way to allow vehicle access.

Here's a measure of the challenge: After the conservation area was closed to vehicles, vandals brought out a generator and a chainsaw to break open the gate. The county had to install a heavier-duty barrier.

But there's hope. So far, the second gate has held up.

Public meetings are 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Sept. 6 and Sept. 12 at the Desert Outdoor Center at Lake Pleasant. A third meeting will be scheduled in Black Canyon City. For more information, go to www.maricopa.gov/parks/lake_pleasant/AguaFria.aspx